

Review - MOON Neo 430HA



Switching from the subtle harmonies embedded in Van Halen's "Jamie's Cryin'," to John Bonham's massive drum sound via the recent HD remasters of the first two Led Zeppelin albums, I am stunned by how much musical depth, detail and sheer dynamic energy the MOON by Simaudio Neo 430HA reveals, especially in light of its \$4,300 price tag. To some, this will come across as steep for a headphone amplifier, but the 430HA is way more than a headphone amplifier. \$4,300 gets you a DSD/high res DAC, and a superb linestage, too. Not to mention all the cables (and rack space) you *don't* need to connect these three components. Unless you have an amazing DAC, spend the extra \$800 and get the 430HA with DAC board installed. Those not needing the DAC can put the 430HA on their favorite shelf without DAC for \$3,500.

Having spent a lot of time with Simaudio's 650D and 750D digital players, as well as with their top-of-the-line 800 series preamplifier, I'm truly floored by just how much of that performance exists inside the case of the 430HA for a fraction of the cost. Only a small group of companies could actually produce a product like the 430HA, and to Simaudio's credit, this component is designed and built in their Montreal facility from top to bottom, including the metalwork. For those who don't know, Simaudio has a full metalworking shop in house with their own 5-axis CNC mill.

A quick test drive of some of the world's finest headphones quickly establishes the 430HA as a top shelf headphone amplifier. Delivering 667mw of power into 600 ohms and 8 watts into 50 ohms, there is nothing it won't drive, even the notoriously tough to drive HiFiMan HE-6. Headphone enthusiasts with a diverse collection of phones will appreciate the 430HA's range of connectivity, with 3- and 4-pin XLR jacks along with the standard 1/4" jack. There's even a 1/8" input jack on the front panel for the line level input of your favorite portable music player. Hiding the headphone outputs behind a sliding door on the front panel is particularly cool.

With one set of variable RCA outputs to drive a power amplifier and a fixed pair of outputs (to drive a tape deck!!) the main difference between the 430HA and the big guns in the Simaudio arsenal is the lack of fully balanced XLR outputs. Keeping with the concept of using the 430HA as a preamplifier and DAC, it can easily be placed near your laptop or other digital source, with long interconnects to a more conveniently placed power amplifier elsewhere. The robust output stage of the 430HA drives 30-foot interconnects with ease.



The biggest difference

Those choosing the DAC option will be equally pleased with the digital input options: a pair of standard SPDIF inputs, Toslink and USB, supporting PCM 16/44.1kHz to 24/192 with the USB input going up to PCM 32/384kHz. The USB input also supports DSD 64, 128 and 256. An analog crossfeed circuit works for those wanting less of a ping-pong effect in their heads and can be engaged or disengaged to your preference. This came in handy with the latest Florence + the Machine album, which has an overly spacey feel.

Yet there are times that this expansive soundstage is a blast. Sun Kil Moon's "Little Rascals" through the Audeze phones was completely psychedelic. Mark Kozelec's voice sounds almost as if he's being water boarded while singing – a textural effect not always conveyed with lesser headphone amplifiers. And of course, early Pink Floyd is fantastic.

However, should you be looking for an all-in-one component to anchor your audio system that happens to have a power amplifier and a pair of speakers, the 430HA is one of the best buys in high-end audio today. Certainly the best I've ever experienced, and long-term *TONEAudio* readers know I do not throw the B-word around loosely.

An honest confession

As much fun as I've had with the 430HA over the last nine months, I must confess it's become the reference preamplifier in my home system, now consisting of a Conrad-Johnson LP-120sa+ power amplifier and a pair of GamuT RS5 speakers. Thanks to the balanced input, I've just recently added

the Simaudio MOON Evolution LP610 phono stage and an AVID Volvere SP turntable to the mix. To put this in perspective, the \$4,300 Simaudio 430HA is the cornerstone of a \$70,000 system and I couldn't be happier.

The 430HA is a rare component offering performance well beyond the asking price. Simaudio has only cut corners in the sense that the casework is of a more spartan design than their legendary Evolution series and the remote less elaborate than the one supplied with their flagship components. But not on the inside. Simaudio's Lionel Goodfield is quick to point out, "The internal circuitry of the 430HA shares the same level of components as the Evolution series in critical locations, and the M-eVOL2 volume control is the same as the one we use in our much costlier 600i and 700i integrated amplifiers."

The rest of the technical innovations lurking inside the 430HA are best explained here: <http://www.simaudio.com/en/product/37-headphone-amplifier.html> But suffice it to say it all works brilliantly, and the minute you give the volume control a hefty clockwise twist you won't care about any of it – that's the mark of a great component in my book.

Great components and stellar build quality always count for a lot and it's tough, if not impossible, to get an amazing performance if these boxes aren't checked. But after months of extensive listening and comparison, the 430HA is indeed special, musical and effortlessly real. This component lives in a zone, price-wise, that isn't mega high end, but is still a substantial investment. However, it offers mega performance – it offers refinement rarely available at this price. As much fun as the 430HA is with first class headphones, you don't really notice what a phenomenal performer it is until you drop it in a room with great speakers and experience the bass control and upper register separation and cleanliness it delivers.

Like every other Simaudio component I've used, it takes a few days of operation, fully powered to sound its best. Eco-minded, take note; the 430HA only draws half a watt when in standby mode, so your carbon footprint will not expand.

Regardless of whether you use it primarily as a headphone amplifier or a 2-channel control center, with power amplifier and speakers, this is a component that you won't want to move on from – unless you make a five-figure investment. Goodfield sums it up when he says, "It's not only the ultimate solid-state headphone amplifier, but most likely the ultimate one box solution for computer based audio. That's what we were trying to accomplish." I couldn't agree more. **-Jeff Dorgay**

